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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0403  
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RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY  
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0445  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0820

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000759

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PROP](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: SPIES LIKE US: THE MEDIA'S TENDENCY TO SEE U.S.  
AGENTS EVERYWHERE

REF: A. A. NOUAKCHOTT 634

[1](#)B. B. NOUAKCHOTT 686

[1](#)C. C. NOUAKCHOTT 718

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A December 14th allegation of spying on the part of the US Embassy brought to light an increasing tendency in the local media towards personal attacks, sensationalism and an erosion in journalistic integrity. Since the August 6th coup it has become commonplace to use bold titles to attract reader's attention without fact checking. Recent anonymous and overt threats to journalists demand they toe the party line or risk sabotage of their newspapers, credentials and ability to continuing practicing journalism. Editors complain that sales, subscriptions and advertisements have plummeted forcing them to use unethical journalistic tactics. Spy allegations against AmCits in the Mauritanian context are nothing new, but the increased personal treatment of USEmbassy personnel as well as deliberate fabrication of figures and distortion or stories is notable. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Rumors of espionage: On December 14, the daily newspaper "La Renovateur" published a brief article under the headline "ESPIONAGE?" (Spying?) stating that the Charge was accompanied by a U.S. military man in uniform during a visit to President Abdallahi in his native village of Lemden. The article claimed that the serviceman asked to see Gendarmerie elements tasked with keeping Abdallahi under surveillance, and ended with the sentence: "This is an unusual occurrence that reminds one of the Noriega adventure." Similar stories about a U.S. serviceman accompanying the Charge appeared in several online news sites. However, on December 16 "La Renovateur" published a correction (something rarely seen in the Mauritanian press, and with only a two day lapse) to the original article. The correction piece stated that the supposed U.S. serviceman was actually only a bodyguard for the Charge (which was true).

[1](#)3. (C) How stories are selected: Curious about the original article and subsequent correction, PAO, PolAsst, and LES PD Specialist met informally December 17 with Cheikh Tidjane Dia, editor of "La Renovateur." Dia said that the original article alleging espionage was taken from CRIDEM, a Mauritanian news web site ([www.cridem.org](http://www.cridem.org)). "We publish things from all types of sources," he said, indicating that

once a story is out there, it's fair game for publishing. Dia stated he would use CRIDEM as a source for stories in the future, despite the complete falsehood of the U.S. military presence in the Lemden story. Nevertheless, EmbOffs praised Dia for printing the correction article, saying it was a good example of journalistic professionalism, a trait often lacking in the Mauritanian press. EmbOffs further encouraged him in the future to contact the PD section directly if he wanted confirmation on a particular story or rumor.

¶4. (C) A familiar theme: Espionage allegations against U.S. citizens are not uncommon in the Mauritanian press. In 2007, several papers alleged that the Marine House was a "secret CIA prison" with front page photographs as evidence. They cited as proof the fact that people were observed coming and going at late hours of the night (ignoring the fact that the Marine House often hosts parties for the U.S. community). In a December 17 meeting with local Peace Corps director, he confirmed three prior incidents with local and international press where volunteers were accused of being spies, once during an Al Jazeera interview with visiting Peace Corps deputy director, in June 2007. Also, in early October 2008, a web site ran a story alleging that a U.S. diplomat was detained under suspicion of espionage ([www.anbaa.info/spip.php?article488](http://www.anbaa.info/spip.php?article488)). The story was accompanied by an image of the CIA seal on a stark black background. What actually happened was that a U.S. diplomat who was taking pictures on a busy street caught the attention of a passing "journalist" (rumored to be a member of the security services) who escorted him to the police. RSO responded immediately and cleared up the misunderstanding.

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¶5. (C) Eye on America: Personal attacks in the media against US Embassy personnel began surfacing a month ago (Ref B). Even good friend of the Embassy, former International Visitor, and head of the Mauritanian Alumni Association Mohammed Fall Oumere fell prey to this temptation. An article he wrote in the December 15th edition of his weekly paper La Tribune he splashed photos of the US Embassy cafeteria and Charge taken during the remittance of an award on the UN Day for Human Rights to Anti-Slavery Champion Boubacar Messaoud. He criticized Charge D'Affairs Dennis Hankins for having called the "coup" a coup instead of an "event" which according to Oumere shows the personal efforts of high level US diplomats on behalf of anti-coup US homologues. Fall continued to criticize the relegation of the Mauritanian portfolio to "a small functionary of the Department of State."

¶6. (C) The junta's mouthpiece drones on: It is not only private media fabricating stories but also state-sponsored press is now purposely distorting facts to promote their agenda. A failed October 26th junta trip to Tanzania was labeled a success by the state press (Ref A). A December 15th Horizon (state-sponsored media) article claimed that the 6-14 Climate Change Conference in Poland led to the launch of an 8 million dollar program in Mauritania. According to local USAID rep "the newspaper made it sound like a much larger program initiative and that the junta would control it. This is not correct."

¶7. (C) Intimidation on the rise: On December 11th Mohamed Memine, reporter for Al Alem and president of the Mauritanian Association for the Defense of Journalists was stopped at a checkpoint and "verbally abused" by a policeman. December 12th articles covering the incident in two online sources ([www.ani.mr](http://www.ani.mr)) and ([www.mauritanie-web.mr](http://www.mauritanie-web.mr)) claim Memine was targeted as a journalist and expressed their solidarity with "our brother". On December 10th post received an email from a journalist of the Al Arabiya news channel claiming that since the coup he had been convoked in front of the junta-appointed Minister of Information and threatened three times or have his accreditation revoked. Earlier cyber attacks (Ref C) and other more subtle regressions in press liberty had become common, but this kind of over attack and

firsthand account of intimidation are unusual and should be monitored closely.

8 (C) Comment: Taken together, these incidents indicate a willingness on the part of journalists to print stories without any kind of fact verification. Many local papers also seem inclined to print stories that will sell their papers, rather than provide factual news. The result is that many of the stories that appear in the media must be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism. A story often appears in one paper or web site, and then propagates, either verbatim or with minor changes, to other papers and web sites. This practice creates a sort of self-perpetuating echo chamber, making it difficult to uncover the original source for a story. Furthermore, it is easy for the local media to brand any incident involving U.S. citizens as potential "spying." Such stories sell papers, and mesh well with the conspiracy stories heard on the street of the omnipresence of U.S. intelligence agents and military personnel. Given the current climate of anti-Americanism due to the harsh stance of the US towards the coup the papers must write to their audience's demands. With spontaneous protests erupting all over the country, from the capital to the interior (Ayouun), in support of Iraqi journalist Zaidy, one can never underestimate the local appetite for stories critical of the US, especially with respect to foreign policy.

HANKINS